

# 'How 20 Cannibal Kings Proposed To Me'

*No American Girl Was Ever Wooed Like This One, Who Went All Over Savage Africa Unattended*



The Wonderful Headdress Miss Simonton Could Have Worn Had She Married Cannibal King No. 1 Who Ruled in the Congo.

IDA VERA SIMONTON is the only white woman who ever went into the African jungle unescorted by white men. Miss Simonton is a Pittsburgh girl, so perhaps that was why she wasn't frightened. To study the habits and customs of the natives at first hand, she spent a year in the West African cannibal country on the line of the equator, and among the most interesting of her experiences were the proposals of marriage she received from time to time from some twenty cannibal kings. She tells here for the first time the strange story of this romance of the jungle.

Miss Simonton is now engaged in writing a novel founded upon her investigations in the jungle. The book, entitled "Hell's Playground," is to be published by the MacMillan Company within the next few months.

By Ida Vera Simonton

TWENTY proposals in twelve months—and all from cannibal kings. That was part of my experiences in the West African jungle, and I think it constitutes a record.

Not that I am at all vain about it, for, after all, I was the first white woman these savages had ever seen, and it was undoubtedly the novelty of my appearance rather than any personal charms I might have possessed that led them to make advances to me.

The scene of this romance was on the Ogowe River, which follows the line of the equator in the French Congo. The river is lined with dense forests, inhabited by gorillas, apes, chimpanzees, pythons and other tropical beasts. My object was to study the natives of the jungle at first hand, and as I could get no white person to accompany me I decided to go alone.

My companions on the steamer which left me at Cape Lopez, a little trading port on the coast, declared that it was suicidal for me to venture into the interior alone, but I hadn't travelled all the way from America to return without getting what I was after, and I decided to go through with it.

At Cape Lopez there were only twenty-one white men and not a single white woman. I remained there for three weeks waiting for the sailing of the little steamer to take me up the Ogowe River into the interior. The boat was piloted by a giant savage. As we sailed up the river this savage called my attention from time to time to the hideous monkeys jumping from tree to tree, huge twenty-foot pythons sunning themselves near the shore and the noses of crocodiles sticking up out of the mud.

The news that a white woman was in the jungle travelled quickly, and whenever the boat stopped the shore was crowded with curious natives.

The thing that struck them as

most strange was the fact that I had neither master nor husband, for among them every woman becomes a wife at the age of ten or twelve, and their status is that of chattels.

Shortly before we arrived at Lambarene, a government and mission station, I received my first cannibal proposal. It was from Orungu, a Nkomi chief, who had heard of me some days before and had traversed the jungle to meet me. He came loaded with gifts—native knives, tom-toms, beads and quaint musical instruments.

He offered to make me his chief wife—he had twelve already. I told him through an interpreter that with us thirteen was unlucky, and I was too superstitious to accept his offer. But he wouldn't be dissuaded. He said he would dismiss one of his other wives and then I would be the twelfth, and I laughed to him I couldn't consent to that. He got real angry.

"You think you too thin. Me quick make you fat, like other wives," he said, and I have no doubt he would, for among these savages fat is the cardinal point of beauty. In the course of my travels in the jungle I found that when a slim girl from ten to fourteen is betrothed she is put in the fattening house, where she is kept close and fattened in the most horrible manner. She is forced to eat bananas all day long. The ration consists of only three bananas a day, but these poor girls are made to consume from ten to twenty, besides a mass of fat-foe as the native banana bread is called. By the time the marriage takes place, the bride is fairly swelling in fat, and that was the prospect the Nkomi cannibal held out to me!

It was only by promising to consider the offer that I was able to get rid of him.

I stayed at Lambarene for four weeks, making many excursions into native towns and studying the savages at close range. In one town, away up in the Ashire forest, I was approached by a delegation of three native women rigged up in costumes more ludicrous than anything ever seen in musical comedy.

They had been sent by the native chief, a cannibal by the name of Akanda. One was the keeper of his wives, and the two others were her assistants. They brought gifts and wanted to take me back with them to become a wife of the chief. They enlarged upon the delicacy of cannibal fare.

"Man ketch pass all other flesh for sweet for black man's mouth," they said, which translated into English, means that "human flesh is the best eating of all."

Respectfully, I declined their offer, declaring that I had to continue my travels.

When I left Lambarene, the French commandant insisted upon furnishing me with a canoe, paddlers, an interpreter and a military escort of savages. The latter he claimed, were absolutely necessary, for I was in the very midst of the cannibal country, where two white men had just been devoured by the savages, and he would not permit me to go further inland without them.

I consented, and there I was, practically all alone in savage Africa, surrounded by mystery and the charm of the great forests afloat upon numerous rivers in a dug-out canoe with a small deck-house in the stern, with almost nude negroes for paddlers, an English mission native for interpreter and Senegalese and Madagascar native guards! The guards themselves would have stricken terror into the hearts of most people, for they were cannibals at heart if not in practice, but I had great confidence in their loyalty to the French. On several occasions they saved me from my paddlers and servants, who became intoxicated, mutinied and would have destroyed me.

At night, when I lay awake in my little camp bed under a small tent, oppressed by the terrific heat and thinking of the savagery all around me and the wild beasts kept at bay only by the fires built around us, I occasionally reached out to Bubu, the

"Of course all the Kings didn't propose to me at once. But I felt like a little girl in a strange ring-around-a-rosy game, with the ring made up of the 20 Kings and their astonishing 'engagement' presents."

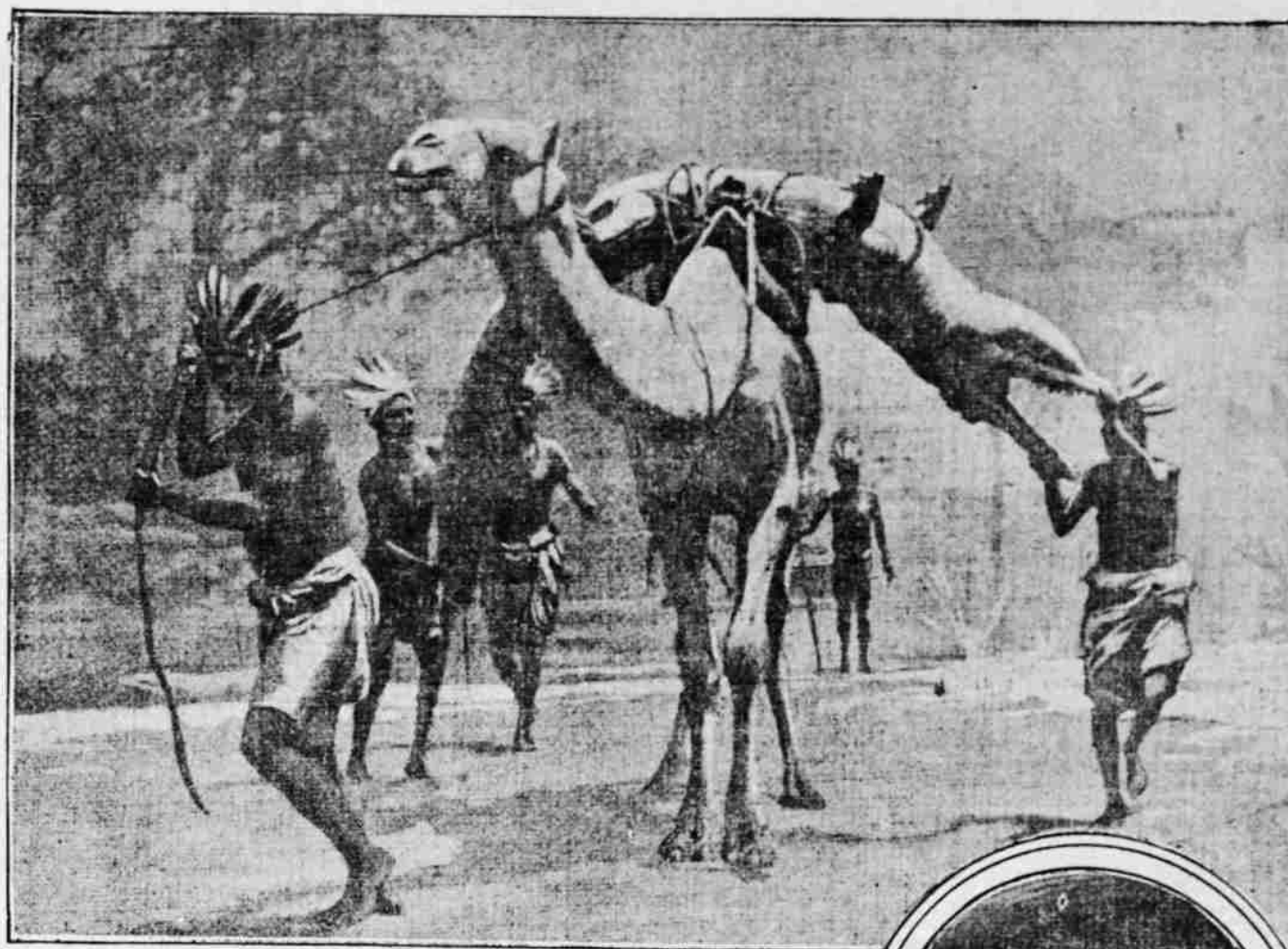
big Senegalese guard stretched full length on the ground at my feet, and he would quiet my fears, assuring me that no harm would come to me while he was around, and I believed him.

After travelling many miles into the interior, I made my permanent headquarters on a small island in Lake Fernand-Vaz, almost upon the equator. My nearest neighbor was forty miles away. Cannibal settlements were all around me, although on the island itself the only other human inhabitants besides myself and my servants were a cannibal chief and his family.

I hadn't been on the island many weeks before this chief, who had undertaken to protect me, offered to make me his wife. He pointed out that in that way I would be absolutely safe from the dangers of the jungle, whereas, alone I was always at the mercy of my servants, who might at any time prove treacherous.

Naturally, I had to be most diplomatic in rejecting him, although apparently he was not at all sensitive about it, for he let everyone know how he had fared, and the result was that I was besieged with offers from other chiefs, who thought they might be more successful.

These chiefs had various ways of proposing. The first I knew, in the majority of cases, that I had smitten the heart of a chief, was when a messenger would arrive from his highness bearing me gifts. These gifts were of all kinds. A dead snake, an elephant's ear, an alligator's eggs, skins of wild animals heavy with decaying flesh and odor, carved ebony and ivory, skulls of apes, monkeys, antelopes, and



Cannibal King No. 7 Bringing a Crocodile to Miss Simonton as an "Engagement" Present.



Miss Vera Simonton Who Traveled All Through Savage and Unknown Africa by Herself.

They serenaded me night after night, making the jungle hideous with the everlasting racket they made on their tom-toms, gong-gongs and the mihambi. Weird and wild were their tunes, but anything but musical.

That I escaped harm from these rejected cannibals is really miraculous, and I owe my salvation mainly to the fear they all had for the French Government, under whose protection they knew I was. But though it was all very flattering, it was dangerous, and although the principal dangers of the African jungle are believed to be the sleeping sickness, the wild beasts and cannibalism, I think the principal danger I ran was in rejecting the addresses of the twenty cannibal kings who proposed to me.

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